

**Nasibeh Hedayati**

**Values and morality in Iranian schools**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to investigate morality in Iranian schools. In particular, the aim in this doctoral thesis is to explore morality and moral values as expressed in official documents of the Ministry of Education and two secondary schools. Thus, three main areas are addressed to raise awareness in this regard: (1) values in the official documents; (2) the life purposes of students; and (3) moral conflicts from the perspectives of students and teachers.

This article-based thesis draws together the finding of four original studies. The following four main questions correspond with the results reported in the original studies: (1) What are the values in the Iranian educational system, what kinds of teachers are desired for the Iranian educational system and what kind of citizens are teachers expected to educate? (2) What are the life purposes and purpose profiles of Iranian secondary school students? (3) What are the main themes of moral conflicts identified by Iranian students and teachers and how do the moral conflicts identified by students and teachers differ from each other? (4) What are the religious moral dilemmas that Iranian students and teachers identified?

The first step in raising awareness of the values in this system was to study official documents such as *The Theoretical Foundation of Transformation in the Educational System of the Islamic Republic of Iran (TFFTES, 2011)*. This document presents the philosophy and goal of education in the Iranian educational system.

Empirical data were also collected from two of Tehran's secondary schools, one for females and the other for males, in 2016. The students were 12 to 16 years old and the teachers were 27 to 52 years old. First, data were gathered from students (female  $n = 174$ , male  $n = 163$ ) through essays and questionnaires: they were asked to complete a survey that included questionnaires related to life purposes and open questions investigating moral conflicts, and they were given one hour to do so. Second, teachers (female  $n = 10$ , male  $n = 10$ ) were interviewed and asked to narrate their stories about moral dilemmas. Thus, the empirical data included students' essays, transcripts of interviews with teachers on moral conflicts, and students' questionnaire responses on life purposes. The study framework com-

bines qualitative and quantitative data analysis. The results of the study are reported in the original articles (Hedayati, Kuusisto, Gholami and Tirri, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c and 2019).

Although, according to the findings of the study, values in the Iranian educational context reflect Islamic thinking, what is happening in schools in some areas conflicts with the values and goals promoted in the educational system. In some cases, however, the school context reflects the values in the official documents. According to the official documents of the Ministry of Education, the Iranian educational system and the corresponding teacher education focus on religion, are centralized and systematic, and are based on Islamic values and principles. However, according to what they wrote about their life purposes, Iranian students are self-oriented, concentrating mainly on hedonistic and materialistic pleasure that is in contrast with the Islamic view. Further, content analysis of the students' and the teachers' essays revealed four main themes behind the moral conflicts in Iranian schools: 1. Matters related to Staff's behavior, 2. Matters related to Students' behavior 3. Sensitive issues; and 4. Matters related to Parents' behavior. Unfair and aggressive punishments were the most common cause of moral conflict. The school staff administered punishment in response to student violation of school rules. Sensitive issues caused conflicts that reflected Islamic values and principles in the school context: this kind of conflict shows how religion can provoke moral dilemmas. It seems that neither teachers nor students consider the perspective of the other side when a conflict happens. Interestingly, analysis of the essays and of the responses concerning life purposes brought out gender differences among students that is in line with religious, Islamic values in Iranian culture.

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*Keywords:* Values, morality, religion, gender, purpose in life, moral conflicts, moral dilemma, secondary school, Iran

# Arvot ja moraaali Iranin kouluissa

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## Abstrakti

Yhteisötutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli tutkia moraalialia Iranin kouluissa. Erityisesti tämän tohtorintutkimuksen tavoitteena on tutkia moraalialia ja moraalialia arvoja, sellaisina kuin ne on ilmaistu koulutusministeriön ja kahden lukion virallialia asiakirjoissa. Siksi kolmella pääalueella pyritään lisäämään tietoisuutta tältä osin: (1) arvot virallialia asiakirjoissa; (2) opiskelijoiden elämän tarkoitukset; ja (3) moraalialia konfliktit opiskelijoiden ja opettajien näkökulmista.

Tämä artikkelihakuinen opinnäyte koostuu neljän alkuperäisen tutkimuksen tuloksista. Seuraavat neljä päätehtävää vastaavat alkuperäisissä tutkimuksissa ilmoitettuja tuloksia: (1) Mitkä ovat arvot Iranin koulutusjärjestelmässä, millaisia opettajia toivotaan Iranin koulutusjärjestelmälle ja millaisia oppilaita opettajien odotetaan kouluttavan? (2) Mitkä ovat Iranin toisen asteen oppilaiden elämän tarkoitukset ja tarkoitusprofiilit? (3) Mitkä ovat iranilaisten opiskelijoiden ja opettajien tunnistamat moraalialia konfliktit ja miten opiskelijoiden ja opettajien tunnistamat moraalialia konfliktit eroavat toisistaan? (4) Mitkä ovat uskonnolliset moraalialia ongelmat, jotka iranilaiset opiskelijat ja opettajat kokevat ja havaitsevat?

Ensimmäinen askel tietoisuuden lisäksi tämän järjestelmän arvoista oli tutkia virallialia asiakirjoja, kuten Transformanssin teoreettinen perusta Iranin islamilaisen tasavallan koulutusjärjestelmässä (TFFTES, 2011). Tämä asiakirja esittelee koulutuksen filosofian ja tavoitteen Iranin koulutusjärjestelmässä.

Empiirisiä tietoja kerättiin myös kahdesta Teheranin lukiosta, yksi naisille ja toisille miehille vuonna 2016. Opiskelijat olivat 12-16-vuotiaita ja opettajat 27-52-vuotiaita. Ensinn tiedot kerättiin opiskelijoilta (naiset n. 174, miehet n.163) esseen ja kyselylomakkeiden kautta: heille annettiin tehtäväksi täyttää kysely, joka sisälsi elämän tarkoitukseen liittyviä kysymyksiä, kyselylomakkeet ja avoimet kysymykset annettiin oppilaille moraalialien ristiriitojen tutkimiseksi, ja heille annettiin yksi tunti aikaa täyttää lomake. Toiseksi opettajia (naisia n = 10, mies n = 10) haastateltiin ja heitä pyydettiin kertomaan tarinoitaan heidän moraalialisista ongelmista. Siksi he poistivat oppilaiden esseeet opettajahaastattelujen tekstin moraalialisista konflikteista ja opiskelijoiden kyselyvastaukset elämän tarkoituksiin. Opintojaksossa yhdistyvät laadullinen ja kvantitatiivinen data-analyysi. Tutkimuksen tulokset ilmoitetaan alkuperäisissä artikkeleissa (Hedayati, Kuusisto, Gholami ja Tirri, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c ja 2019).

Vaikka tutkimuksen tulosten mukaan arvot Iranin koulutustilanteessa heijastavat islamin ajattelua, tietyillä alueilla kouluissa tapahtuva koulutustilanne on ristiriitaista, koulutusjärjestelmän edistäminen arvojen ja tavoitteiden kanssa. Jois-

sain tapauksissa kouluympäristö kuitenkin heijastaa virallisissa asiakirjoissa olevia arvoja opetusministeriön virallisten asiakirjojen mukaan Iranin koulutusjärjestelmä ja vastaava opettajien koulutus keskittyvät uskoon, ovat keskitettyjä ja järjestelmällisiä ja perustuvat islamilaisiin arvoihin. ja periaatteet sen sijaan mitä he kirjoittivat elämäntarkoituksistaan, Iranin opiskelijat ovat itsekeskeisiä ja keskittyvät pääasiassa hedonistiseen ja materialistiseen nautintoon, joka on ristiriidassa islamin näkemyksen kanssa. Lisäksi oppilaiden ja opettajien esseiden sisällysanalyysi paljasti neljä pääteemaata Iranin koulujen moraalisten konfliktien taustalla: 1. Henkilöstön käyttäytymiseen liittyvät asiat, 2. Opiskelijoiden käyttäytymiseen liittyvät asiat 3. Arkaluonteiset kysymykset; ja 4. vanhempien käyttäytymiseen liittyvät asiat. Epäreilut ja aggressiiviset rangaistukset olivat yleisin syy moraalisiin konflikteihin. Koulun henkilökunta määräsi rangaistuksen vastauksena opiskelijoiden koulujen sääntöjen rikkomiseen. Arkaluonteiset kysymykset aiheuttivat konflikteja, jotka heijastivat islamilaisia arvoja ja periaatteita kouluympäristössä: tällainen konflikti osoittaa, kuinka uskonto voi aiheuttaa moraalisia ongelmia ja katsoo että kumpikaan opettaja eikä opiskelija ei ota huomioon toisen osapuolen näkökulmaa konfliktin tapahtuessa. Mielenkiintoisella ja erikoisella tavalla esseiden elämää koskevia kysymyksiä vastausten analyysi toi esiin opiskelijoiden sukupuolierot, jotka ovat.

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*Avainsanat:* Arvot, moraalit, uskonto, sukupuoli, elämän tarkoitus, moraaliset konfliktit, moraalinen dilemma, lukio, Iran

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Helsinki, 22.09.2019

*Nasibeh Hedayati*

## **List of original publications**

### **Study I: Value learning trajectories in Iranian educational system**

Hedayati, N., Kuusisto, E., Gholami, K., & Tirri, K. (2017a). Value learning trajectories in Iranian teacher education. In A. Kuusisto & L. Gearson (Eds.), *Value learning trajectories: Theory, method, context* (pp. 179-194). Münster, Germany: Waxmann.

### **Study II: Life purposes of Iranian secondary school students**

Hedayati, N., Kuusisto, E., Gholami, K., & Tirri, K. (2017b). Life purposes of Iranian secondary school students. *Journal of Moral Education*, 46(3), 283-294.

### **Study III: Moral conflicts in Iranian secondary schools**

Hedayati, N., Kuusisto, E., Gholami, K., & Tirri, K. (2019). Moral conflicts in Iranian secondary schools. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, doi: 10.1080/13617672.2019.1618151

### **Study IV: Gender-specific religious moral dilemmas in Iranian schools**

Hedayati, N., Kuusisto, E., Gholami, K., & Tirri, K. (2017c). Gender-specific religious moral dilemmas in Iranian schools. In R. M. Elmesky, C. C. Yeakey, & O. Marcucci (Eds.), *The power of resistance: Culture, ideology and social reproduction in global context* (pp. 365-381). Somerville, MA: Emerald Publishing Limited.



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## **ORIGINAL ARTICLES**

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## **I A summary of the thesis**

# 1 Introduction

The modern world is experiencing a huge increase in social and cultural mobility, due to the global refugee crisis and migration. As a result of this process, most societies are becoming more diverse, specifically in terms of race, gender, language, and religion (Holm & Londen, 2010). There is a significant need in such a situation to enhance knowledge about diversity and to improve moral competence (Franken 2018; Osbeck, Franck, Lilja, & Sporre, 2018).

One of the most controversial moral issues in education is the effect of culture on the values and norms of a specific society (Haidt, & Kesebir, 2010), hence value diversity is considered an important aspect of moral education (Van der Kooij, de Ruyter, and Miedema, 2013). In line with this, Islam and specifically Islamic values have attracted the attention of Western researchers in their efforts to understand the values and raise awareness in this regard (Franken, 2018; Halstead, 2007).

Thus, the aim of this study was to shed light on morality and moral values in Iranian schools. The focus is on values as expressed in official documents and how they are manifested in the school context. Official documents including the *Theoretical Foundation of Transformation in the Educational System of the Islamic Republic of Iran (TFFTES, 2011)* were studied to shed light on the values in this system. The investigation also covered life purposes and moral conflicts in Iranian secondary schools, the aim being to find out about values and moral issues in the Iranian educational context and how they relate to official documentation.

Educating people to act and behave morally and to acquire moral norms is known as moral education (Noddings, 2013). School is one of the main places in which this happens, and it fosters moral development in children. In spite of all the similarities in basic morality and values, there are cultural differences (Campbell, 2013; Haidt, & Kesebir, 2010; van der Kooij, de Ruyter, & Miedema, 2015). Little is known about Middle Eastern Islamic countries in this regard. Therefore, an investigation into morality and values in the Iranian educational system could help educators, policymakers and teachers around the world to understand the specific values that might be encountered in diverse environments. Further, the results of such a study could be used in teacher training and to promote moral education.

Life purposes may be cultivated through moral education, and on the other hand they may also motivate morality (Heng, Blau, Fulmer, Bi, & Pereira, 2017). It has been reported in various studies that purpose as a moral virtue and intrapersonal intelligence could provide a moral compass, especially in terms of caring for others. This, in turn, could guide youth to contribute to the world (Han, 2015; Mariano & Savage, 2009; Moran, 2014). Young people without a sense of purpose seem to lose their faith in values, leading to emptiness and a sense of hopelessness in their lives (Damon & Gregory, 1997). It has been shown that

schools, and specifically teachers, play a crucial role in promoting and supporting young people to identify their life purposes and to take meaningful steps to fulfill them (Bundick & Tirri, 2014; Mariano, Going, Schrock, & Sweeting, 2011).

School as a community consists of the principal, teachers, students, and parents. To this one should add the Ministry of Education and its role as the organization that educates both teachers and students. Moral conflicts might arise in this community as a result of a value clash among the various sides. Understanding and expressing emotions and being able to understand the perspectives of others is necessary for teachers, students, and even parents in the making of decisions in moral conflicts. Such conflicts in the school context could reflect the values of the educational system, and may also show whether students and teachers have the skills to resolve them. (Colnerud, 1997; Cuban, 1992; Tirri, 2010; Koc, & Buzzelli, 2016).

This article-based thesis introduces four original papers in which the following questions are investigated:

- (1) What are the values in the Iranian educational system, what kind of teachers are desired for the Iranian educational system and what kind of citizens are teachers expected to educate?
- (2) What are the life purposes and purpose profiles of Iranian secondary school students?
- (3) What are the main themes of moral conflicts identified by Iranian students and teachers and how do the moral conflicts identified by students and teachers differ from each other?
- (4) What are the religious moral dilemmas that Iranian students and teachers identified?

The first question is addressed in the first publication (Value learning trajectories in the Iranian educational system), in an analysis of official documents with a specific focus on *The Theoretical Foundation of Transformation in the Educational System of the Islamic Republic of Iran (TFFTES, 2011)*. The Ministry of Education articulated the philosophy and goal of education for the first time in this document, which is therefore significant as the theoretical foundation of the Iranian educational system. The second study (Life purposes of Iranian secondary school students) addresses the second question through an investigation that categorizes the life purposes of Iranian students, and a further analysis to identify their purpose profiles. The qualitative content analysis reported in the third article (Moral conflicts in Iranian secondary schools) addresses the third question, and

finally, the fourth article (Gender-specific religious moral dilemmas in Iranian schools) analyzes religious moral dilemmas. Table 1 summarizes the methods and data applied and presents the publication information.

**Table 1:** Methods, data analysis, and information about the publications

Article	Data	Methods	Data analysis	Publication information
Value-learning trajectories in the Iranian educational system  (Article I)		Theoretical paper		<i>Value learning trajectories: Theory, method, context</i> (pp. 179-194). Münster, Germany: Waxmann.
Life purposes of Iranian secondary school students  (Article II)	Students of two secondary schools in Tehran (N=336)	-Life-goal questionnaire  -Meaning-in-life Questionnaire  -Psychological well-being measure	Statistical analysis:  Exploratory factor analysis and cluster analysis	<i>Journal of Moral Education</i> , 46(3), 283-294.
Moral conflicts in Iranian secondary schools  (Article III)	Students (N=302) and teachers (N=20) at two secondary schools in Tehran	Students' essays and interviews with teachers	Qualitative content analysis	<i>Journal of Beliefs and Values</i>
Gender-specific religious moral dilemmas in Iranian schools  (Article IV)	Students (N=302) and teachers (N=20) of two secondary schools in Tehran	Students' essays and interviews with teachers	Qualitative content analysis	<i>The power of resistance: Culture, ideology and social reproduction in a global context</i> . Somerville, MA: Emerald Publishing Limited

This thesis comprises two main parts. The first part, which summarizes the study, consists of six chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework. Chapter 3 sets out the context of the study, in other words the Iranian educational system, and is based on Article I. Chapters 4, 5 and 6, respectively, cover the methods, results and conclusions based on the empirical findings reported in the three publications (II, III, IV). The second part of the thesis consists of the four main publications, which are presented after the List of References.

## **2 Theoretical framework**

### **2.1 Moral values in the school community**

#### **2.1.1 Morality and moral values defined**

Many educational researchers have recognized teaching as a moral activity and teachers as moral educators in this respect (Campbell, 2003; Hansen, 2001; Oser, 1994). “Teaching itself involves moral action. Teachers are moral agents, and education as a whole, and thus classroom interaction in particular, is fundamentally and inevitably moral in nature” (Buzzelli, & Johnston, 2001, p. 876). However, the literature yields confusion over the definition of morality (Hansen, 1998). There are objective views according to which specific moral values such as honesty and justice should be included because they are right regardless of the situation and the individual’s feelings, whereas according to subjective views the meaning of morality is “situated and contextualized” (Campbell, 2000; Lipe, 2004; Maccadden, 1998). Campbell (2003) defines morality as the principles of right and wrong that guide people to do the right thing, whereas according to Buzzelli and Johnston (2001) it “constitutes the set of a person’s beliefs and understandings which are evaluative in nature: that is, which distinguish, whether consciously or unconsciously, between what is right and wrong, good and bad” (p. 876). Hunink, Leeuwen, Jansen, & Jochemsen (2009, p. 490), in turn, define morality as ‘a set of values, norms, rules and habits that are practiced within a certain community’.

In light of the above, it could be concluded that morality in schools incorporates the values of teachers, parents, students, principals, and society on a higher level. These values are in constant dialogue and guide each person towards making the right decisions in school life. As Maccadden (1998) explains, morality is a phenomenon that is constructed socially through daily interactions at school. However, it may be very complex in the school context to resolve a conflict given that each individual has his or her own personal values that derive from their background (Daniel, Schiefer, Möllering, Benish-Weisman, Boehnke, & Knafo, 2012). Moreover, teachers and school staff have their own professional values (Joseph & Efron, 1993; Campbell, 2003). Social, cultural and religious differences in society also influence moral identity (Joseph & Efron, 1993; Haidt, & Kosebiri, 2010). As Campbell (2003) points out, “Whose values should define what is right or wrong?” (p.13).

The term that relates crucially to the definition of morality is values, the key characteristic of which is to give guidance in terms of making the right decisions and choices. Not only do they facilitate judgment-making, they can also motivate



human actions (Shwartz, 1994). Values are defined as the set of ideas, concepts and beliefs that guide humans in life as individuals or as a group. These guiding principles are considered 'right', 'true' and 'good', and have an impact on attitudes, behavior and decisions (Alavi, & Rahimipoor, 2010; Haljasorg & Lilleoja, 2016). They also serve as a basis on which to judge a particular action or type of behavior as good or desirable (Halstead, Taylor & Taylor, 2000).

Individuals vary in the importance they place on some values rather than others, thus each person has a value hierarchy. There are also age-based differences: young people might reject values accepted by adults, for example. Thus, values differ from one individual to another, and from one society to another. Even so, societies might share values that are considered universal (Daniel et al., 2012; Shwartz, 1994).

Moral development as a process through which an individual internalizes morality is an important aspect of children's socialization. There appear to be two main orientations to such development. The first of these focuses on Justice Principles of moral reasoning as presented in Piaget's and Kohlberg's theories. Kohlberg based his theory on Piaget's view that cognitive development in children happens in stages. With this in mind he explored moral reasoning in children using a set of moral dilemmas. He came to the conclusion that their moral development is based on their cognitive development, in other words that it improves in different stages based on the level of cognitive development. Later, his student Carol Gilligan directed the orientation toward principles of care, focusing on emotional aspects as the basis of moral development: her belief was that Kohlberg's theory ignored women's experiences in this regard. There has also been a shift from the cognitive aspect to the emotional aspect of moral development, although some scholars believe that the two can be integrated according to the situation (Gilligan, 1977; Kohlberg, 1964; Molchanov, 2013; Nunner- Winkler, 2015).

Social interaction and the social experiences of young people have strong effects on their moral development (Smetana, 1999). School, specifically interaction with teachers and peers, plays a major role in transferring values to the next generation and preparing young people to live in a society based on them (Hatipoglu, 2017; Haljasorg, & Lilleoja, 2016). The main values that are promoted in schools include citizenship, values embedded in personal, social and health education, values specific to the national curriculum, and values taught in religious education (Halstead et al., 2000). Trust, integrity, honesty, justice, loyalty, respect and care are some of the basic values emphasized in teaching and education (Campbell, 2000). It should also be noted that religion may have an effect on morality and on the values that are promoted in schools and society (Bloom, 2012).

Complementing these values, the school as a community has its own ethos that clarifies the general atmosphere of the context. According to Halstead et al. (2000), this ethos consists of: “forms of social interaction, the attitudes and expectations of teachers, the learning climate, the way that conflicts are resolved, the physical environment, links with parents and the local community, patterns of communication, the nature of pupil involvement in the school, discipline procedures, anti-bullying and anti-racist policies, management styles, the school’s underlying philosophy and aims and the system of caring” (Halstead et al., 2000, p. 176). From Maccadden’s point of view (1998), norms such as raising hands before asking questions and standing in a queue build the school’s organizational morality. Students learn the rules and norms that should be followed in school life, and the consequences of breaking them.

In spite of the universal and professional principles and standards of teaching, teachers seem to be confused about the notion of value (Husu & Tirri, 2007). Further, they accept they are not prepared to deal with everyday moral issues (Tirri, 1999). Thus, they need clearer guidelines to enhance their moral understanding and thereby to develop their moral sensitivity (Campbell, 2000; Mathony, 2008).

### **2.1.2 The role of life purpose in motivating morality**

Victor Frankl (1959), in his influential book, describes purpose as an inner strength that is the primary motivation and force in human life. Having a purpose could help humans to take meaningful steps in life while acting morally, given that values and goals arise from this broad sense of directedness (Frankl, 1959; Demon, Menon & Bronk, 2003).

Researchers have increasingly focused on the positive role of having a sense of purpose in positive youth development in the transition to adulthood (Benson, 1997; Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2009; Mariano & Savage, 2009). It has been shown that having a sense of purpose, in addition to being a “developmental asset”, is positively related to happiness, life satisfaction and well-being among young people (Benson, 1997; Bronk et al., 2009; Han, 2015). Purpose has also been identified as a key factor in identity formation that may help young people to overcome identity crises and mental-health problems (Burrow & Hill, 2011; Erikson, 1968).

Demon, Menon & Bronk (2003) elaborated on the moral and ethical dimensions of a sense of purpose in their theory. According to them, “purpose is a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self” (p. 121). This definition recognizes the need not only for a meaningful purpose in life but also for involvement in activities that serve such a purpose. The distinctive dimension is the extension of this meaningful purpose in life beyond the self. In other words, the purpose should benefit the self and others. Damon and his colleagues investigated

life purpose among American youth based on this definition, and identified four main groups of young people as follows: 1) those with a meaningful purpose in life, but whose lacking engagement in activities turns them into nothing more than ‘dreamers’; 2) those who are deeply involved in some activities but their uncertainty about the purpose turns them into ‘dabblers’; 3) the ‘purposeful’ ones who have recognized a purpose that goes beyond the self and are actively engaged in pursuing it; and 4) the ‘disengaged’, who fall short on all the main dimensions (Damon, 2008). Moran (2009) expanded these dimensions in her study. She found that dreamers and dabblers could be self-oriented or other-oriented in terms of purpose, and therefore differentiated self-oriented dabblers, other-oriented dabblers, self-oriented dreamers and other-oriented dreamers accordingly.

Researchers have found a link between purpose and morality. It is suggested that a sense of purpose fosters moral commitment and prosocial behavior. Matsuba and Walker (2005) concluded from their examination of moral exemplars that they are more purposeful and less self-oriented in comparison with others. This finding is in accordance with those reported in an earlier study conducted by McAdams, Diamond, St. Aubin, and Mansfield (1997) that focused on teachers who are concerned with and committed to others. On the other hand, values could be the motivation behind major life goals (Roberts & Robins, 2000). In their study, Roberts and Robins showed how life goals could be classified based on value domains.

Purpose is not only a personal pursuit, could also contribute to issues beyond the self (Damon, 2008). As a virtue it could motivate other virtues (Han, 2015). Having a purpose that goes beyond-the -elf promotes sensitivity to other humans (Reilly, 2009). Schools, therefore, in addition to imparting knowledge about what is right and what is wrong, should teach students about their relationship with society on a higher level (Heng, et al., 2017), thereby helping them to consider society at large when they extend their purposes beyond the self (Heng et al., 2017).

Previous studies on a sense of purpose among youth imply that huge numbers of young people have no sense of direction in their lives. Even if they have an identified purpose, they drift around without taking realistic steps toward achieving their future goals (e.g., Damon, 2008). However, it has been shown that schools, and specifically teachers, play a crucial role in promoting and supporting young people to identify their purposes in life and to take meaningful steps toward their fulfillment (Bundick, & Tirri, 2014; Mariano, Going, Schrock, & Sweeting, 2011).

## 2.2. Moral conflicts in the school community

The everyday life of a school as a community involves interactions among teachers, principals, students, and parents. This community is also related to society at a higher level. Given the complexity of the school context, individuals may well have different interpretations of its core moral principles, and disagreements are inevitable (Campbell, 2003). These ‘value discrepancies’ could be described as conflicts, dilemmas or contradictions (Buzzelli & Johnson, 2001).

From a philosophical perspective, a moral conflict is ‘any situation where normative factors (such as moral principles, values or even certain forms of moral duties) clash and require incompatible actions’ (Fourie, 2015, p. 9). Such conflicts in an educational context arise from situations in which a moral choice involving competing values has to be made (Ehrich, Kimber, Millwater, & Cranston, 2011). The main challenge with regard to both moral conflicts and moral dilemmas is to make the right decisions based on the right values, and in everyday life, they might be used interchangeably. Nevertheless, in cases of moral conflict there is a right moral decision whereas whatever decision is made to resolve a moral dilemma might hurt one or even both sides (Fourie, 2015). Fransson and Grannäs (2013) take a step further and point out that values, norms and guidelines constantly change as a result of social and political transformations: this makes it even more complex to define and resolve moral dilemmas. Teachers, students and parents have their own perceptions of ‘the right thing’ when values conflict (Fransson & Grannäs, 2013). Thus, it could be very challenging for teachers making a moral decision when there is conflict among various relationships (Campbell, 2000; Husu & Tirri, 2003; Pope, Green, Johnson & Mitchell, 2008). In this study, all references to moral conflicts or moral issues also incorporate moral dilemmas.

Moral conflicts and moral dilemmas have been examined from different perspectives, such as through moral reasoning and identifying the underlying values (Johnston, 1991; Husu & Tirri, 2002; Tirri, 2003), through the strategies that teachers use to resolve them (Ehrich et al, 2011; Maslovaty, 2000; Tirri 1999), and in theoretical discussion about them (Campbell, 2000; Ehrich et al., 2011).

Research findings provide some information about the themes of moral dilemmas and moral conflicts from the points of view of both teachers and students (Tirri, 1998; 1999; 2003). According to Tirri (1998; 1999; 2003), the main themes of moral conflicts in Finnish schools include matters related to the teacher’s work, the morality of students’ behavior, the rights of minority groups, peer relations, harassment, and general school rules. Pope et al. (2008) took a different perspective and examined the elements that might conflict and make decision making in assessment challenging in American schools: they found that the needs of teachers, students, and parents might well overlap with institutional requirements. This is in line with Tirri and Husu (2002)’s findings in the Finnish context that differences in interpretation of the best interests of the child among teachers, parents,

and the educational institution constituted one of the main themes of moral dilemmas among preschool teachers. Giving examples of values that might compete in Israeli schools, Shapira-Lishchinsky (2011) mentions school rules, justice, confidentiality, loyalty to colleagues, family agendas, and educational standards.

Making moral decisions is among the daily activities of teachers. Oser (1991) mentions five types of strategy that they might use in their attempts to resolve a moral issue. (1) Avoidance: the teacher avoids the conflict and the decision-making; (2) Delegation: the teacher delegates the decision-making to someone else; (3) Single-handed decision-making: the teacher takes full responsibility and makes the decision; (4) Incomplete discourse: the teacher allows the students to express their ideas but she or he makes the decision; (5) Complete discourse: the teacher takes one step further and involves the students, allowing them to share the responsibility of making the decision. The resolution strategies teachers adopt are case-specific, but many prefer single-handed decision-making (Maslovaty, 2000; Tirri, 1999). In Oser's opinion, however, allowing discourse over a 'round table' is the best way of resolving moral conflicts (Oser, 1991; Oser & Althof, 1993).

Moral values help teachers to justify their moral decisions and reflect their moral orientation. They may well adopt several moral perspectives simultaneously when reflecting on a moral decision. Such decisions could reflect their own background values and beliefs, professional values and rules, as well as their special skills in managing the issue (Husu & Tirri, 2003). According to Oser (1991), justice, care, and truthfulness are critical issues in the professional decision-making of teachers. The best interests of the child could also be the main concern in their reasoning (Tirri, 1999). There have been investigations into the moral orientations of students in resolving a moral conflict. Tirri (2003), for example, found that girls were more care-oriented and concerned about attachment and needs whereas boys were more concerned about equality and justice. Justice and care are moral orientations teachers and students might well use when encountering and attempting to resolve a moral dilemma (Tirri, 2003; Johnston, 1991). Depending on the kind of dilemma they are dealing with, they tend to show care and empathy with relationship conflicts, whereas justice-oriented reasoning is related to cheating, for example (Johnston, 1991; Tirri, 2003).

Resolving real-life moral conflicts requires various skills. Research has shown that teachers are not well-prepared to deal with moral issues, and they are not even aware of the moral dimension of their profession. They also show confusion over the definition of values in the school (Husu & Tirri, 2007; Tirri, 1999). Although values may be relative, and change depending on the situation, teachers need clear guidelines about the codes of morality in their school (Campbell, 2000). Indeed, becoming familiar with real-life moral conflicts could benefit both teachers and students in terms of improving their moral reasoning and sensitivity in making moral judgments (Tirri, 1998; 2011).

Teachers use their skills in managing moral issues in the school context. Husu and Tirri (2003) refer to this as the Ethics of probability, meaning that teachers considering the consequences of actions may have alternatives in mind and will seek a solution that is also in line with their background beliefs and professional values.

According to Bebeau, Rest, & Narvaez (1999), the following four basic components of morality are prerequisites for acting morally: moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation and moral character. Moral sensitivity is a vital skill in terms of understanding and resolving moral issues. A morally sensitive person can visualize different solutions and actions in a specific situation, and understand it in a way that results in a moral decision. Bebeau et al. (1999) describe moral sensitivity as follows:

[It] is the awareness of how our actions affect other people. It involves being aware of the different possible lines of action and how each line of action could affect the parties involved (including oneself). Moral sensitivity involves imaginatively constructing possible scenarios (often from limited cues and partial information), knowing cause-consequent chains of events in the real world, and having empathy and role-taking skills. Moral sensitivity is necessary to become aware that a moral issue is involved in a situation. (p. 22)

In addition to complying with professional values and guidelines, teachers and parents need to listen to children before making any decisions, and to consider the consequences of any action (Mahony, 2009). Teachers respond to moral dilemmas differently depending on their life experiences and varying levels of moral sensitivity (Bullough, 2010).

### 3 The context of the study

#### 3.1. Values learning trajectories in Iranian educational system (I)

The first article, published as a book chapter, investigates values in the Iranian educational system. It addresses three specific research questions: what are the values in the Iranian educational system? What kind of teachers are desired for the Iranian educational system and what kind of citizens are teachers expected to educate?

The chapter reveals the Islamization process in a brief history of teacher education in Iran before and after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The Iranian educational system went through major changes after the revolution, the most important goal being to establish an educational and teacher-education system that promoted Islamic values in schools, educational organizations, and society in general. This was in stark contrast with the previous regime, which emphasized Westernization and secularization. The 1979 Revolution was a turning point, resulting in a major shift in values in the educational system from a secular orientation to an ideological-political approach. The main changes that affected the schooling system were the obligation on females to wear a scarf (Hijab) in schools, the segregation of schools by gender, and the Islamization of textbooks.

These ideological changes were confirmed in official documents published by Parliament and the Ministry of Education. One of the Ministry of Education's seminal documents was the *Theoretical Foundation of Transformation in the Educational System of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (TFFTES, 2011), a guide to the official Iranian and general educational system that clarifies philosophies and values. According to TFFTES (2011), this document was prepared by the Ministry of Education in 2007-2011. The main purpose was to produce an official document that could be used as a guideline in the educational system and in teacher education. It is worth pointing out that it was the first time since the Islamic Revolution that the Ministry of Education had drawn up such a document. Other official documents from the Ministry of Education and Parliament were examined to shed more light on the values being promoted, including the *National Curriculum* (2011), *The Ministry of Education Committed to Serving Law* (1990), *Recruiting and Employment Law* (1989), and the *Supreme Council Approvals about fundamental transformation in Educational System* (1990). The *National Curriculum* is also a Ministry of Education document, but the others are related to recruitment guidelines for teacher education prepared and confirmed by Parliament.

It is also stated in TFFTES (2011) that the basic values of education stem from Islam and the Islamic Revolution. Thus, the aim of education is to prepare students for a pure life, 'a life full of piety and divine closeness to God'. In other words,

students should be educated according to the values and principles of Islam to ensure a pure school and eventually a pure society. This life of purity that is explained in the Holy Quran is six-dimensional: (1) religious and moral; (2) physical; (3) social and political; (4) economic and professional; (5) scientific and technological, and (6) aesthetic and artistic. However, the first (moral and religious) dimension is the fundamental one and is integrated into the other five. Thus, all processes of selecting, educating and evaluating teachers should be based on Islamic values and principles to educate teachers who will educate students accordingly.

*The National Curriculum* (2011) introduces subjects that conform to the *pure life* dimensions so that the education is based on Islamic values. Teacher education also includes subjects aimed at familiarizing teachers with these values. The Ministry of Education has specific criteria for selecting schoolteachers that are based on values rooted in Islam and the Islamic Revolution.

Accompanying these ideological changes, some organizational changes have also been confirmed and implemented since the Islamic Revolution. Both Parliament and the Ministry of Education emphasize a more centralized educational system and teacher education, meaning that all policies and decisions are controlled by the central government.

According to the latest modifications introduced in 2012, basic education consists of six years of primary school and six years of secondary school (6-6). However, it seems that the process is still going on: in the first phase the Ministry had a 6-3-3 plan (primary school, lower-secondary school, and upper-secondary school) but it is trying to change it to a 3-3-3-3 (lower-primary school, upper-primary school, lower-secondary school, and upper-secondary school) in the near future (IRNA, 2014). Students wishing to gain admission to universities and institutes of higher education are required to pass a national university-entrance examination after finishing upper-secondary school (Fallahi, 2010). Only a limited number of students are admitted.

The Ministry of Education has the responsibility for recruiting, educating, promoting, and evaluating teachers and teacher education. The minimum required qualification for teaching at primary school is a Bachelor's degree, and the minimum requirement for teaching at secondary school is a Master's degree, although in remote towns and villages teachers with lower degrees might be accepted (Fallahi, 2010). In line with its centralizing policy, a specific institution named Farhangian University, under the supervision of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, educates teachers throughout Iran for basic, or K-12 education. Students need to pass the national university-entrance examination to gain admission to this university. After graduation, prospective teachers are also required to participate in a competitive interview consisting of general and professional elements. The general element is related to religious and political attitudes to check commitment to Islam and the Islamic Revolution.



The professional element involves the analysis of teaching techniques and methods.

### 3.2. Gender in Iran

Iran's official religion according to the constitution is Shia Islam, which means following the doctrines and practice of Quran and Imami Shias (*Constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran*, 1979). Turning away from Islam is a crime under the constitution, therefore criticizing Islam is totally forbidden.

Since the Islamic Revolution it has been compulsory to base all aspects of society, including the educational system, on Islamic values and principles. Women comprise one of the main groups that have been strongly affected by such an imposition. A few years after the Islamic Revolution, in 1983, a dress-code law was confirmed requiring women to wear the scarf (hijab) in all public places, including schools. Consequently, schools and universities of teacher education are segregated by gender. The thinking is that, in a purified society, women can be freely active if they cover their bodies and if organizations are segregated by gender. (Boodman & Tohidi, 1998; Motahari, 1989; Rezai-Rashti, 2015)

Another gender difference according to Shia Islam is the age at which boys and girls should start to fulfill their religious obligations such as praying five times a day, fasting, and for girls wearing the hijab: According to Shia Islam, girls should start at the age of nine, whereas boys start at 15 (*FarsNews*, 2013; *Hawzeh.net*, 2010).

Female activists have been trying hard since 1979 to improve the situation of women and to promote women's social activities. In spite of the limitations, women have been very active in society, and female students have showed high achievements in both basic and higher education (Mehran, 1991; *MehrNews*, 2015a). Religious and secular activists inside and outside of parliament have tried to overcome these limitations by providing different interpretations of Islamic values and principles (Najmabadi, 2001; Rezai-Rashti, 2015; Shahrokni, 2014). The most effective group in this regard comprise Islamist feminists who are familiar with Shia Islam and have been able to reconstruct the meaning of gender in Islamic discourse (Najmabadi, 2001).

## 4. The empirical study: design and methods

### 4.1 Research participants

The data for this study were collected from two secondary schools in Tehran: one exclusively for girls and one for boys. Iranian basic-education schools are segregated by gender, thus data had to be collected from both schools to be representative of both genders. At the time of the data collection, 175 female students and 10 female teachers from the all-girls school, and 163 male students and 10 male teachers from the all-boys school participated in the study. The students were aged from 12 to 16 years, and the teachers from 27 to 52 years. Each school had one teacher for the following subjects: Arabic language, English language, science, literature, art, religious education, and physical education. However, there were two teachers of social science in the all-girls school and two math teachers in the all-boys school.

**Table 2:** Participants of the study

	Students (N=338)	Teachers (N=20)
Age	12-16	27-52
Gender	Female (N=175) Male (N=163)	Female (N=10) Male (N=10)
Subjects	Secondary-school students	Arabic language, English language, science, literature, art, religious education and physical education

## 4.2 Data collection

Permission to collect the data from these two schools was required from the Iranian Ministry of Education to make sure that the research instrument was based on Ministerial ethical codes. Permission was received in Spring 2016 and the data collection started. The Ministry of Education informed the principal of each school about the study in a formal letter, and each principal conducted a meeting in which the researcher was able to explain everything to the teachers so that they could be prepared and decide on the days when the data would be gathered.

The data were collected first from the all-boys school and then from the all-girls school, each time in three phases. First, students were given a small paper booklet to answer questionnaires and open ended questions. The questioners included Bundick and Tirri's (2014) operationalization of the components of purpose proposed by Damon et al. (2003), with the following variables: contents of purpose, which also reveal beyond-the-self orientation; sense of purpose; and goal-directedness. The paper booklet also included a set of open-ended questions was devised by Tirri (1998; 1999; 2003), and the students were asked to write about an unfair situation they had experienced in the school context. They were given one hour to complete that small booklet during their lesson time. The teachers were informed about the data collection in advance in the meeting with the researcher. The researcher, who is a native speaker of the Farsi language (the native language of the participants) introduced herself in each class before handing out the booklets. She was present all the time to answer any question the participants had.

In the second phase, the researcher interviewed each teacher, the interviews lasting at most 30 minutes. The interviewees were asked to narrate the most challenging moral dilemma they had experienced in school as a teacher (Tirri, 1998; 1999; 2003). Finally, to improve the reliability of the research, 20 female students and 20 male students were selected to be interviewed and to re-narrate the essays they had written. In total, the data collection was done in two weeks in Spring 2016.

### 4.3 Measurement instruments

Five instruments were used to collect the data for the study from the participants (Table 2). Bundick and Tirri's (2014) operationalization of the components of purpose proposed by Damon et al. (2003) was utilized to measure the contents of purpose, sense of purpose and goal-directedness of the students. Open questions devised by Tirri (1998; 1999; 2003) were used to identify the main themes of moral conflict in Iranian schools. The wording in these instruments was translated from English into Farsi (the native language of the participants) by the researcher. All the instruments have been used in Western countries, but this was the first time they have been applied in the Iranian context.

*Contents of purpose:* Bundick, Andrews, Jones, Mariano, Bronk, & Damon's (2006) 20-item version of Roberts and Robins' (2000) life-goal instrument was used to measure major life goals such as "helping others in need", "being a good writer", and "having a high-status career". The participants rated these 20 life goals on a five-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 1= not important to 5= very important) in response to the question: "How important are the following goals in your life?" The items were related to the seven dimensions mentioned in Bundick, Andrews, Jones, Mariano, Bronk, & Damon's (2006) article: economic, aesthetic, social, relationships/family, political, hedonistic, and religious. This instrument revealed a beyond-the-self orientation.

*Sense of purpose:* Steger et al.'s (2006) Meaning in Life Questionnaire was used to assess the degree to which students felt they had found a purpose. It consists of two scales: the extent to which they have found a purpose or whether they are still seeking one. This 10-item instrument is rated on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree. Five items relate to finding a purpose, and five items concern seeking one. The statements to be rated include "I have a purpose in my life that reflects who I am" and "I am looking for something that makes my life meaningful".

*Goal-directedness:* Bundick and Tirri's (2014) nine-item version of Ryff's (1989) Psychological Well-being questionnaire was used to measure the goal-directedness of the students. The nine items are rated on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree: A sample item of this instrument was "I don't have a good sense of what it is I'm trying to accomplish in life" or "I have a sense of direction and purpose in life". Six items were negatively worded so they were reversed in a way that 1 indicated low goal directedness and 5 indicated high goal directedness.

*Moral conflicts:* Two sets of open-ended questions devised by Tirri (1998; 1999; 2003) were used to investigate moral conflicts in Iranian schools.

Students were asked to write about an unfair situation they had experienced in the school context as follows:

Write about a situation in your school in which you or a friend have been treated in an unfair manner. Write a story about the event and answer the following questions: Who treated you or your friend unfairly? What happened? To whom did this happen? Where did it start?

Teachers were asked in an interview to recall the most challenging moral dilemma they had experienced as a teacher in the school context:

What was the moral dilemma you experienced? Where and when did this happen? What kinds of issues did you have to consider in that situation? Who were the other people involved? What made this situation so problematic?

## 4.4 Data analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative analysis was used in the study. The students' life purposes were investigated by means of exploratory factor analysis and K-cluster analysis, whereas inductive and deductive content analysis was used to assess moral conflicts.

### 4.4.1 Statistical analysis

Students' life purposes and the relations among the various components were subjected to statistical analysis (Article II). Robert and Robins' (2000) life-goal instrument was chosen for this purpose. The instrument is based on 20 items that distinguish seven major life goals: relationship ( $\alpha=.571$ ), hedonistic ( $\alpha=.564$ ), social ( $\alpha=.613$ ), economic ( $\alpha=.720$ ), religious ( $\alpha=.728$ ), political ( $\alpha=.517$ ), and aesthetic ( $\alpha=.785$ ). Bundick, Andrews, Jones, Mariano, Bronk, & Damon (2006) reported alpha values in the seven dimensions ranging from .65 to .83. However, according to the primary factor analysis conducted for this study, the alpha values of the hedonistic, social, and economic dimensions were  $\alpha=.466$ ,  $\alpha=.382$  and  $\alpha=.390$  respectively, which are very low. It was therefore decided to conduct an exploratory factor analysis given that this was the first time this instrument had been used in an Iranian context. Moreover, given that the assumption of normality was not violated, maximum likelihood estimation was used (Fabrigar, Wegener, MacCallum, & Strahan, 1999), with direct oblimin rotation based on the assumption that the items are correlated (Field, 2013). The Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin measure (KMO = .699) indicated that the data were suitable for exploratory factor analysis (Field, 2013). It was decided to remove two items because of their low factor loadings ( $<.4$ ). The analysis yielded six factors with eigenvalues greater than one. Given the scree plot, five-factor analysis was the most appropriate for the data,

which explained 50.69 per cent of the variance. The items loaded together on the following dimensions: economics and hedonism ( $\alpha = .609$ ), family and relationships ( $\alpha = .591$ ), social and religious pursuits ( $\alpha = .717$ ), aesthetics ( $\alpha = .627$ ), and acting in public life ( $\alpha = .536$ ). Although the alpha values in some clusters were lower than 0.70 there was an improvement in the Reliability coefficients. Social and religious pursuits represented beyond-the-self orientation in this study.

The relationship among the components of purpose was assessed by means of correlation analysis. Pearson's  $r$  correlations among finding a purpose, seeking a purpose, goal-directedness, and beyond-the-self turned out to be positive. A K-means algorithm (Jain, 2010) was used to identify the students' purpose profiles according to the level of components. Two-, three-, four- and five-cluster solutions were applied to find groups that were theoretically appropriate, and four clusters seemed to be the best option (Naes, Brockhoff, & Tomic, 2010). A statistically significant difference among these clusters was found across the four profiles, the medium and large effect sizes ranging from 0.32 to 0.52 (Cohen, 1992). An independent-samples  $t$ -test was also conducted to compare the means of all dimensions and thereby to assess gender differences.

#### **4.4.2 Content analysis**

Content analysis was used to analyze the students' essays and the teachers' interviews. This kind of analysis is suitable for examining text data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), and may be qualitative or quantitative, inductive or deductive (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Qualitative content analysis was used in this study, and both deductive and inductive reasoning were applied to find codes and categories that gave condensed and broader descriptions of the phenomenon (Elo, & Kyngäs, 2008).

Deductive content analysis is appropriate when the researcher intends to use a set of previously identified categories in a different context (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Tirri's (1998; 1999; 2003) categories were used in this study as an analytical framework to identify themes of moral conflict in Iranian schools. These categories included students' work morals, teachers' work morals, minorities' rights, general school rules, as well as harassment, peer relations, teacher behavior and adult behavior. On the other hand, inductive content analysis is recommended when there has been no previous study and the researcher is dealing with a new phenomenon (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). It was therefore used when we encountered quotations that we could not fit into existing codes to create new codes and categories.

A situation of moral conflict was defined in this study as any situation in which there is a conflict of values, moral principles or duties among different relationships that need a moral decision (Ehrich et al., 2011; Fourie, 2015). Two or more people were involved in each story, thus moral conflicts were identified from various relationships. As a result, some stories yielded more than one theme.

Once the interviews had been transcribed, the stories were translated into English by the researcher and entered into an Excel file to be coded. Phrases that were related to moral conflicts were highlighted and coded. To check the coding the author read the stories and highlighted phrases several times. If there was more than one moral conflict the phrases were highlighted in different colors. When the codes had been identified they were clustered within Tirri's (1998; 1999; 2003) categories. Given the identification of new codes, two main categories - sensitive issues and matters related to parents' behavior - were created inductively. Table 3 below gives examples of the coding and the categorization.

**Table 3:** Examples of the content analysis conducted for Articles III and IV

Stories	Highlighted phrases	Codes	Subcategory	Category
<p>Student example:</p> <p>It was a science class and I was still writing what the teacher had written on the board when the bell for the break rang. We are not allowed to stay in classroom during break time. I tried to explain to the assistant principal [why I was in the class] he did not accept my explanation and gave me a negative mark in my disciplinary notebook.</p>	staying in the classroom during the break	time rules	general school rules	Matters related to students' behavior
	punishing without investigating	unfair punishment	punishment	Matters related to staff behavior
<p>Teacher example:</p> <p>The mother of one of my students called me and asked me to give her son a higher score. She explained that the reason for his low score was that his father and she were separated and about to divorce.</p>	parents asking for a higher score to be given to the student	grading	grading	Matters related to parents' behavior

## 5 Empirical results

### 5.1 Life purposes of Iranian secondary school students (II)

The main purpose of this article was to explore the life purposes of Iranian students at secondary school and to identify the purpose profiles they demonstrate. The study participants comprised 336 students (female  $n = 174$ , male  $n = 162$ ).

Exploratory factor analysis identified the following life-goal orientations among the study participants: 1) economics and hedonism, 2) family and relationships, 3) social and religious pursuits, 4) aesthetics, and 5) acting in public life. It seems that these Iranian students were mostly interested in economic and hedonistic goals, which is in contrast to the basic values in the Iranian educational system. However, on the individual level, having good relationships with parents and siblings ( $M = 4.61$ ;  $SD = .93$ ) was the most highly ranked goal, whereas social and religious goals ( $M = 3.31$ ,  $SD = .90$ ), aesthetic goals ( $M = 3.18$ ;  $SD = .98$ ) and aims related to public life ( $M = 2.82$ ;  $SD = 1.18$ ) were among the least important aspirations. The female and male students had the same aspirations except for aesthetics, which interested the girls ( $M = 3.44$ ;  $SD = .92$ ) more than the boys ( $M = 2.90$ ;  $SD = .98$ ;  $t(334) = 5.182$ ,  $p < .0001$ ).

Social and religious pursuits were included in beyond-the-self orientation, which together with seeking a purpose, finding a purpose and goal-directedness was used for further investigation. A K-means cluster analysis was conducted to classify the students according to their level of finding and seeking a purpose, goal-directedness, and beyond-the-self orientation. Four clusters representing four purpose profiles emerged, which were labeled as follows: 1) self-oriented life-goal pursuer (37%), 2) self-oriented dabbler (24%), 3) beyond-the-self dreamer (21%), and 4) purposeful pursuer (18%). According to the results, the self-oriented life-goal pursuer was the most common among these secondary-school students, meaning that they had found a purpose in life, but they were still searching as well. However, beyond-the-self orientation was weak, indicating little interest in social or religious matters. The second-largest category comprised self-oriented dabblers, who had low scores on all four components of purpose. Beyond-the-self-dreamers ranked third. Members of this group were seeking a purpose oriented toward others, but they lacked involvement and realization. The smallest profile group comprised those who had a purpose that was strongly oriented toward others, and they were committed to realizing it.



## 5.2 Moral conflicts in Iranian secondary schools (III) and (IV)

The article concerning moral conflicts (III) addresses these two questions: What are the main themes of moral conflicts identified by Iranian students and teachers? And how the moral conflicts identified by students and teachers differ from each other? The study participants comprised 302 students (female  $n = 163$ , male  $n = 139$ ) and 20 teachers (female  $n = 10$ , male  $n = 10$ ). The stories written by 12 of the students were unclear, and were not included in the data analysis.

Four main themes of moral conflicts were identified from the 310 stories: 1. Matters related to Staff's behavior, 2. Matters related to Students' behavior, 3. Sensitive issues, and 4. Matters related to Parents' behavior.

***Matters related to staff's behavior***, the biggest category, referred to the behavior of teachers, assistant-principals and principals (students  $n=248$  stories and teachers  $n=10$  stories). Two subcategories were identified within this category: punishment and other matters. Most of the stories related to punishments that were considered unfair or aggressive (students  $n=200$  stories and teachers  $n=0$  stories), the former attracting the most discussion. Many students wrote about situations in which a member of staff had punished them or someone else without making sure they were at fault. According to one student: 'it [the punishment] was unfair; the assistant principal should have first made sure who did it'. Another student wrote: 'if it was necessary to punish us, he should have punished both of us [not just one of us]'. The students wanted the staff to be more careful about punishing those were deserving of punishment.

On the other hand, the staff reported reacting in that way because the students had broken some of the school's common rules. These other sides of the stories were placed in another category (see *matters related to students' behavior*). The 'Other matters' subcategory concerned grading, criticizing teaching method, discrimination, cheating, breaking social codes, and imposing personal views. Breaking social codes and imposing personal views were identified inductively. The following citation refers to a conflict that arose from a teacher's discrimination against a group of students who did a project together:

We did a group project for our teacher, and I did most of the work. But our teacher entered the project for a provincial competition under the name of just one member of the group. It was unfair. It should have been sent as a group project. (Female student)

***Matters related to students' behavior*** as a category comprised two subcategories: students' work moral and peer relations (students  $n=212$  stories and teachers  $n=4$  stories). The work ethic was related to situations in which the students had failed to conform to a rule, a norm or a value (students  $n=135$  stories and teachers  $n=4$  stories). Students were expected to respect these rules, norms and values, and

failure to do so produced a reaction from the staff. As shown, these reactions constituted categories in staffs' behavior. For the most part in these stories, staff members were concerned about violations of rules and responsibilities, and they used their authority to control their students' behavior. The students, in turn, believed that the way the staff members reacted was 'too much', 'unfair' and 'unnecessary'.

The peer-relation subcategory concerned conflicts among students (students  $n=86$  stories) related to interpersonal relations, harassment, and breaking social codes.

The following story exemplifies harassment among students:

A group of students bully a weak, small girl in our school. Once they wanted to put her head in the toilet. She did not say anything; she did not even tell the principal or the assistant principal. I think she should have told the principal. (Female student)

***Sensitive issues*** within this category were coded inductively in two subcategories: matters related to religion and matters related to minorities (students  $n=15$  stories and teachers  $n=2$  stories). Most of the issues related to Islamic values. Students are supposed to act and behave according to specific Islamic rules as the staff see it, whereas students considered the values or the staff's behavior unfair. The staff's reactions in these stories were also categorized under *matters related to staff's behavior*. Matters related to religion concerned dress rules, boundaries of intimacy and doctrinal issues. The stories in this subcategory were narrated by female students, and only one teacher mentioned an issue related to boundaries of intimacy. Only one story concerned matters related to minorities, told by a male teacher. The following is a quotation from it:

As both a Kurd by birth and a Sunni by belief, I sometimes hear other teachers insult the Sunni. I am not a religious person, but this religion is part of my identity, and it is very difficult for me to decide what to do at those times, whether to show that they have insulted me and they shouldn't be talking like this or to just ignore it and pretend nothing happened (Male teacher).

The main difference between the male and female students concerned matters related to religion as a subcategory of *sensitive issues*. Given their significance, such stories narrated by female students were submitted for publication as a book chapter (see Article IV), addressing the following question: What are the religious moral dilemmas that Iranian students and teachers identified? According to the content analysis, 15 female students wrote of issues related to Islamic values and principles. Matters related to religion included dress codes, boundaries of intimacy, and doctrinal issues. Six girls wrote about situations in which conflicts arose because of dress codes in Iran. According to Islamic principles, women have to wear the scarf (hijab) in public places, including schools. In these cases, the staff expected the female students to have an appropriate hijab and to cover their hair, whereas the students thought this was unfair and believed they should have

the right to choose. Another six stories related to the boundaries of intimacy and physical contact between women. Within the Iranian educational system, teachers should monitor sexual intimacy among students as a guard against homosexuality. These six female students believed that the staff's reaction to their intimacy with their friends was aggressive and could possibly ruin their friendships. The last three stories related to students' confusion about Islam, and conflicts that arose in religious-education classes when they asked questions about Islam and its beliefs. The teachers appeared to be worried that asking questions could lead to criticism of Islam, which is absolutely forbidden in Iran. Thus, these situations created a challenge for the teachers. However, as the girls saw it, teachers should be able to convince them.

The only story narrated by one of the teachers was assigned to the boundaries of intimacy category. The teacher concerned was having trouble deciding whether or not to help a student whose girlfriend had become pregnant. Sexual relations outside marriage are forbidden in Islam, and harsh rules imposed by the Iranian government control the expression of sexuality in Iranian society (Smerecnik, Schaalma, Gerjo, Meijer, & Poelman, 2010).

***Matters related to parents' behavior***, which was the smallest category (students  $n=2$  stories and teachers  $n=7$  stories), concerned conflicts that involved parents. The matters raised included aggressive punishment, discrimination, not co-operating with the school, grading, and dropouts. More teachers than students told such stories, their concern being to protect their students from physical harm. There were cases in which parents were not so cooperative with the school, or asked that their children be given higher grades. The following is an example of a challenge encountered by a teacher in dealing with parents:

The mother of one of my students called and asked me to give her son a higher grade; she explained that the reason for the student's bad score was that she and his father were living apart.... On one side was the student's family problem and on the other side was the school and other students and being fair... . (Male teacher

## 6 Discussion

### 6.1 The main findings of the research

The main purpose of this study was to investigate morality and moral values in the Iranian educational system, and to identify the main values and how they are reflected in life purposes and moral conflicts among the school community. The following research questions were addressed 1) What are the values in the Iranian educational system, what kind of teachers are desired for the Iranian educational system and what kind of citizens are teachers expected to educate? 2) What are the life purposes and purpose profiles of Iranian secondary school students? 3) What are the main themes of moral conflicts identified by Iranian students and teachers and how the moral conflicts identified by students and teachers differ from each other? 4) What are the religious moral dilemmas that Iranian students and teachers identified? These research questions are considered in four original publications (Hedayati, Kuusisto, Gholami & Tirri, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c and 2019).

School is one of the main places in which moral education happens and where students learn to act and behave in a morally acceptable way. Morality comprises a set of values, rules and norms that guide people in a specific community in terms of what is right and what is wrong, what behavior or actions are desirable and good. Therefore, the basic values of the educational system which comes both from the official documents and the society influences the moral education and the values that are going to be transferred to students. As part of its moral education, not only should school teach students about life purposes and having a purpose in life, it should also promote purposes beyond the self that contribute to society. Furthermore, students should acquire the skills to resolve conflicts and to act morally when they arise. Teachers should also be able to identify moral conflicts and moral dilemmas, and to resolve them. These theoretical frameworks (see Chapter two) guided the formulation of this research.

The results of this study are, in the main, on two levels. The first level concerns the context of the research, including the values set out in official documents of the Iranian educational system. Following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the whole of Iranian society, including its educational system, went through major changes to make all aspects of society based on Islamic values and principles. The Islamization process brought major changes to the educational system, including gender segregation in schools, the Islamization of textbooks and the compulsion for women to wear the hijab in public places. Textbooks, curricula, and the school environment are also based on this ideological view. As a result, the primary role of a woman is defined in textbooks as a mother and wife. However, in spite of these limitations, women have been able to find ways to overcome some of the

challenges. To improve their situation, they have been showing resistance and seeking a new interpretation of Islamic values and principles.

The Ministry of Education has the responsibility for educating both students and teachers. According to official documents, all aspects of the Iranian educational system have been based on Islamic values and principles since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Thus, education is connected to the Holy Quran in which having a pure life is introduced as the main goal of life as a Muslim, and consequently as the main goal of education. The Ministry of Education aims to prepare students for this pure life. To achieve this, it carefully recruits teachers who prove their belief in Islam in practice, such as praying five times a day and having an appropriate hijab among women. Furthermore, the Iranian educational system is highly centralized: the same textbooks are used throughout the country, for example, even though Iran is a very diverse society consisting of different ethnicities with different languages and cultures (Cheng & Beigi, 2012).

The results on the second level are based on the empirical analysis of the life purposes and moral conflicts identified by students at lower-secondary school, as well as by teachers of different subjects. The data for the study were gathered in 2016 in two lower-secondary schools in Tehran, one for boys and one for girls.

According to the results of these empirical findings, the life goals of Iranian secondary-school students ( $N = 336$ ) seem to be mainly self-oriented (61%): they have found some purposes but they continue to seek new ones. It means that they seek high-paying jobs, a high standard of living, and an exciting life, despite the fact that the Islamic values promoted in the Iranian educational system are against materialistic and hedonistic life purposes. The Iranian students' life purposes reflected those reported in Damon's study (2008) on American students. Surprisingly, *social and religious* goals were not as important as *economic and hedonistic* goals among the Iranian students. This also goes against the ultimate goal of the Iranian educational system, which is to promote religious education. On the other hand, *social and religious* goals in this study loaded with *helping others*, which reflects Islamic values. Helping others is one of the five pillars of Islam that a Muslim should follow in daily life (Rasool, 2000). The only gender difference in this study related to *Aesthetic* goals, which mattered more to girls than to boys. The Iranian educational system purports to define specific characteristics for boys and girls, and this trend is also reflected at university level (*Iran Newspaper*, 2016). In terms of single items, most of these Iranian students valued the family. This reflects the collectivist culture of Iranian society and the fact that Islam values family (Gholami, Kuusisto & Tirri, 2015; *TFFTES*, 2011).

The empirical study of moral conflicts identified 310 stories narrated by 302 students (female  $n = 163$ , male  $n = 139$ ) and 20 teachers (female  $n = 10$ , male  $n = 10$ ) from the same two schools. Deductive and inductive content analysis of the stories indicated that moral conflicts in Iranian schools have four main themes: *matters related to staff's behavior*, *matters related to students' behavior*, *sensitive*

*issues and matters related to parents' behavior.* As in previous studies (Tirri, 1998; 1999; 2003), the way school staff reacted to student violation of rules and values was the most common theme. Punishment as a subcategory of *matters related to staff behavior* reflected the most common moral conflict in which staff were accused of inflicting unfair or physical punishment when a student or a group of students violated the school's rules. The teachers' stories related to all the main categories, whereas the students tended to tell stories related to staff behavior. According to the findings of this study, seemingly the most common moral conflict occurs when a student breaks a school's rule and staff members react to this. From the students' point of view, the staff's unfair or aggressive punishment was the most controversial issue. However, in most of these stories they had violated a school rule and did not heed their responsibilities as students. One of the main *sensitive issues* categories reflected the Iranian culture, which is bound by Islamic values, and included matters related to religion and minorities. Matters related to religion concerned moral conflicts between students and staff over dress rules, boundaries of intimacy, and doctrinal issues. In all these stories the students felt that school rules such as these, based on Islamic values, were unfair, and the staff's reaction to their violation was aggressive and unfair. Matters related to religion were raised only by female students, and could also be related to Islamic values. According to Shia Islam, religious obligations start for girls at the age of nine, whereas for boys it is 15. The participants of this study were 12 to 16 years old, hence the males were not yet bound by their religious obligations. These issues were therefore of interest to the female participants.

It seems that both students and teachers did not take the perspective of the other side as an important skill in resolving a moral conflict and fostering empathy. Students mentioned violation of the rules, but they only focused on the staff's unfair and aggressive reaction. On the other hand, the teachers only paid attention to the rules that had been violated without considering how their reactions might be unfair and aggressive, or how they might influence the students. This could reflect the power distance in Iranian society, the schooling system, and the fact that the Iranian educational system does not promote moral reasoning or moral sensitivity (Gholami, Kuusisto, and Tirri 2015; Hasani 2015).

## 6.2 Evaluation of the research

This section focuses on evaluation, specifically on the validity and reliability of the study, and finally on ethical considerations.

Validity can be assessed in many ways. In this study, we needed to check the validity of the instruments. The instruments have been used before in American and Finnish studies, therefore the measurements appear to measure what they are supposed to measure (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2002). However, given that this was the first time they were being used in the Iranian culture, a pilot study was conducted to improve the validity of the research. The small booklet containing the questionnaire items and open questions was pre-tested on a group of students ( $N=25$ ) in a school in Tehran. The students were asked to let the teacher know if there was a concept that they did not understand. According to the data from the pilot study, the students had no problem with any of the concepts.

The instructions were based on the English version of the questions, but in order to increase the validity of the study the first author, who is a native speaker of Farsi, gave oral instructions and explained each question in every class and to every teacher. She introduced herself in each class and explained the research, assuring students that their answers would remain anonymous.

Students' purposes were also studied by means of factor analysis because K-cluster analysis is an explorative method and might have methodological challenges. This methodological triangulation and the fact that the results were in line with those reported in previous studies indicate the validity of the results (Creswell, 2003).

Another validity issue was the fact that some concepts might have been difficult for teenagers to understand. In order to collect stories related to moral conflicts we asked the students to write about unfair situations rather than moral dilemmas, first because of their age, as they might not understand the concept of a moral dilemma, and second because justice is one of the main universal values the violation of which could create a moral conflict (Haynes, 1998; Oser 1991).

The first researcher coded the essays and interviews, then the second researcher coded 10 per cent of the student data and 100 per cent of the teacher data separately to increase the validity of the coding. Kappa values were calculated for the five main categories, and the values varied between 0.70–0.80 and 0.88–1.0, indicating substantial and excellent agreement, respectively (Landis, & Koch, 1977). Disagreements were discussed among the authors.

It should also be pointed out that the results of this study are based only on two schools located in Tehran, and cannot be generalized to the whole population (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2002). Nevertheless, Tehran as the capital city of Iran, has a very diverse population originating from different cities in the country (*Migration to Tehran*, 2006).

The reliability of a study depends on its consistency and repeatability (Martin, 2007). In order to verify the reliability of the essays reported in the results, 40 students were randomly selected to be interviewed and to re-narrate the story they had written (the students were asked in the booklet if they were willing to be interviewed). Moreover, the alpha values of the study on purposes are presented in Chapter 4, and they are mainly satisfactory.

The role of the researcher should be considered in any discussion on research ethics. One Iranian researcher (the first author) collected the data. She is originally from Iran and she translated all the instruments from English into Farsi. Even though the schools were segregated by gender, given that the society outside the schools, including organizations, private institutions, and offices, is mixed in gender, the researcher's gender did not appear to be a problem. Students and teachers interacted with the researcher in similar ways in both schools.

Given that the participants were teenagers, permission to collect the data in the schools had to be obtained from the Ministry of Education. The researcher was granted permission, which was the only official permission needed to collect data from the students and the schools. The school, including the staff and students, was informed that all the data would be processed anonymously to protect the confidentiality of all parties.

### **6.3 Implications for further research**

The aim in this study was to investigate morality and moral values in Iranian schools and the educational system. The original publications (Hedayati, Kuusisto, Gholami & Tirri, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c and 2019) focus on values in the Iranian educational system, Iranian students' life purposes, and moral conflicts in Iranian schools.

As Noddings (2013) states, one of the main places in which students learn to act and behave morally is at school. Investigating morality and moral values in the school context will help educators to improve moral education and teacher education.

The Iranian educational system educates students based on Islamic values, hence Iranian students are expected to be religious and to act in accordance with those values. However, according to the results of this study, Iranian students' life purposes are not in line with Islam. Interestingly, their life-goal preferences reflect those found in Western studies. In spite of all the cultural differences there should be global reasoning behind the fact that youth throughout the world have the same life goals, and this could be studied further in the future. Moreover, education for



a purpose is an important part of moral education. Thus, there is a need for research promoting beyond-the-self life purposes in Iranian schools, and on Iranian teachers' view of their life purposes.

Another result of this study, which conflicted with the Islamic values of the educational system, related to religious moral conflicts. It seems that there are groups of young people who criticize and challenge school rules that are based on Islamic values. This shows a gap between the rules and current practice. Further investigation of policymakers' views is called for to establish how this gap can be reduced. It would even be of interest to measure the level of moral sensitivity in policymakers to know if they are able to consider the perspectives of others.

It could be concluded from the moral conflicts identified by Iranian students and teachers that both groups lack moral sensitivity, and they do not consider the perspective of the other side. Therefore, measuring the level of moral sensitivity in future may help to enhance understanding of moral conflicts.

Finally, given the research evidence of a relational element in moral conflicts, and that at least two sides are involved, of which one is the protagonist (Tirri, 2003), it would be valuable in future studies to investigate these social relationships.

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## **II Original articles**